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ABSTRACT

To alleviate problems associated with free composition as a method of foreign language writing instruction, the directed writing method was adapted for use in a college French composition course. High-quality French texts, often of only a page or two and written by native speakers, are used as a basis for grammatical analysis and discussion and a model for translation. Selection of subject matter is less important than selection of appropriate language level. A Jules Verne passage used for a third-year course illustrates the technique. The text is first translated into English and idioms, misunderstood constructions, and ambiguous vocabulary are discussed. Second, students analyze grammatical and syntactic problems using one or more reference books. Specific questions on two grammatical problems, tenses and reflexive verbs, and more general questions focusing on other areas of possible confusion offer bases for discussion. Third, students are required to find, in the text, French equivalents of words, constructions, and idioms on a list provided. The fourth step involves correction of two English translations written by the teacher, one corrected in class only and the second submitted to the teacher and corrected in class. The approach has been used successfully in second- through fourth-year courses at Michigan State University. (MSE)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPOSITION SKILLS VIA DIRECTED WRITING

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The Development of "Composition" Skills Via Directed Writing

Free composition has long been a component of many textbooks as well as a regular activity in courses in composition and syntax. Free composition supposes the choice of topics by students, or the assignment of a topic which is to be freely attacked by every member of the class. While this form of composition may give reign to the imagination of a few students, it is more likely to result in a rambling, ungrammatical disquisition about student vacations or relationships with difficult college roommates. Linguistically, the result is chaos, and correction is a nightmare for the instructor, due to the infinite variety of topics and an equally infinite variety of errors. Because there is no common ground for discussion, correction in class is extremely difficult and instructors must resort to laborious dissection of each and every composition in order to correct each and every mistake made. Students may or may not profit from the corrections, depending on whether or not the instructor demands re-writing of corrected compositions.

Some years ago, I sought a way to obviate the problems caused by free composition. After looking at a number of textbooks, and observing the various ways in which colleagues taught composition courses, I settled on a method which has worked very well for me, and which is the subject of this presentation. The term "directed writing" was invented by Prof. Joseph Donohoe. Several of my colleagues have adapted the method I describe here to their own teaching style; I describe the way

in which I use this method in my classes. I have had very good results with this method, and would therefore like to share it with colleagues in the field.

In my presentation of this method, I refer consistently to French texts. Please understand that a text in any language can be substituted, and that when I say "native speaker of French", I also mean native speaker of whatever language is being taught.

This method of attacking writing in French pre-supposes the use of excellently-written texts by French-speaking authors. To use texts written by English speakers, no matter how well they may speak or write French, is to run the risk of introducing anglicisms to be copied by students. I realize that, exceptionally, there may be English speakers who can write "native French", but I suspect that most of us who teach foreign languages have areas of interference which virtually guarantee that some of the things we say or write will be tinged with anglicisms. The use of authentic French texts will also ease the burden of correction, for we who are often not native speakers, and who may be unsure of some areas in the foreign language, have before us a model of correctness with which we can unerringly correct both what we might write and what the students write.

The French texts to be used need not be long. Often, a page or at most two of a novel or other text of literary quality is sufficient both as a basis for grammatical analysis and discussion and as a model for translation. The subject matter is

really not important, but the level of difficulty is. Proust does not work well even in fourth-year college classes, whereas a text by Colette or Marcel Aymé is perfectly appropriate for advanced students if they can be brought to approach it diligently. Third-year college classes will need something less demanding, but in all cases, the French texts must be difficult enough to pose challenges and require the analysis of structures, idioms and the like which are probably unfamiliar to most of the students.

As an example of a French text which is appropriate for a third-year college composition course, I cite a passage from De la Terre à la lune, by Jules Verne. This text is the basis for the exercises which are described herein.

"Pendant la guerre fédérale des Etats-Unis, un nouveau club très influent s'établit dans la ville de Baltimore, en plein Maryland. On sait avec quelle énergie l'instinct militaire se développa chez ce peuple d'armateurs, de marchands et de mécaniciens. De simples négociants enjambèrent leur comptoir pour s'improviser capitaines, colonels, généraux, sans avoir passé par écoles d'application de West-Point; ils égalèrent bientôt dans "l'art de la guerre leurs collègues du vieux continent, et comme eux ils remportèrent des victoires à force de prodiguer les boulets, les millions et les hommes.

Mes en quoi les Américains surpassèrent singulièrement les Européens, ce fut dans la science de la ballistique. Non que leurs armes atteignissent* un plus haut degré de perfection, mais

elles offrirent des dimensions inusitées, et eurent par conséquent des portées inconnues jusqu'alors. En fait de tirs rasants, plongeants ou de plein fouet, de feux d'écharpe, d'enfilade ou de revers, les Anglais, les Français, les Prussiens, n'ont plus rien à apprendre; mais leurs canons, leurs obusiers, leurs mortiers ne sont que des pistolets de poche auprès des formidables engins de l'artillerie américaine.

Un jour....la paix fut signée par les survivants de la guerre, les détonations cessèrent peu à peu, les mortiers se turent, les obusiers muselés pour longtemps et les canons, la tête basse, rentrèrent aux arsenaux, les boulets s'empilèrent dans les parcs, les souvenirs sanglants s'effacèrent, les cotonniers poussèrent magnifiquement sur les champs largement engraissés, les vêtements de deuil achevèrent de s'user avec les douleurs, et le Gun-Club demeura plongé dans un désoeuvrement profond.

Certains piocheurs, des travailleurs acharnés, se livraient bien encore à des calculs de ballistique; ils rêvaient toujours de bombes gigantesques et d'obus incomparables."

My usual approach to a text used for the first time in a composition class is to require a careful translation into English. I believe that at this level, students need to <u>think about</u> French, and I leave oral communication and the development of conversation skills to other classes. It is certainly possible to conduct third-year composition classes in French, although the

instructor may often feel considerable frustration at the apparent level of understanding. This is, obviously, a matter of choice by the instructor. During the class devoted to translation--one day for a short text--it is usually possible to discuss idiomatic expressions which occur in the text and to explain areas which students have clearly not understood. I find that literary texts often contain numerous constructions which are poorly understood or not understood at all, and that there are frequently ambiguities of vocabulary caused by the students' jumping to conclusions about words which may resemble English words but mean something different.

The second step in this system is an analysis of grammatical and syntactic problems. This step is optional to some extent; the option can depend on the level of the class and on the overall ability of the students. I find that in most classes, including fourth-year college classes, the frequent and repetitive analysis of grammatical and syntactic problems leads to better overall performance by many of the students. Students will almost certainly need a reference for this analysis, and it is the instructor's choice whether to order a grammatical summary or some sort of conventional textbook which contains French texts and grammatical summaries or review. We have been using Carlut and Meiden's French for Oral and Written Review in our third-year classes because it contains both well-written French texts and a systematic review of grammar to which students can refer or about

which exercises can be assigned. I have at times used a reference grammar, such as Mansion's grammar of French (which is without exercises), but I have reached no conclusions about which type of reference is preferable. The textbook, at least, gives a systematic framework, and may provide enough simple grammar for today's third-year students, who seem often to come to composition classes with little grammatical background.

The following questions could be used for a discussion of the French text. These have been divided into two parts: specific questions on two grammatical problems, tenses and reflexive verbs, and more general questions which could be used if additional time were available.

"A. Questions on tenses and reflexive verbs.

1. What is the overall tone of this text: Is the style colloquial or formal? By what signs do you recognize the difference between an informal and a formal text?

2. Why is the **passé simple** used throughout this text?

3. Explain the function of the reflexive pronoun in the verb s'établit, l. 12.

4. "...was developed" is a true passive in English. The passive is relatively rare in French. How is the equivalent to the English passive often expressed in French? (see also question 3).

5. s'improviser, l. 6: how is this reflexive verb different from those above?

B. Other questions on the text. While these questions do not

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deal directly with the grammar emphasized in A, above, they are intended to bring your attention to certain other ways in which the French language can pose problems for English speakers.

1. Explain the repetition of de: d'armateurs, de marchants, de mécaniciens, l. 4. Does English generally do this?

2. sans avoir passé, l. 6: How does this construction differ from its English equivalent?

3. How does the French text express the idea of "energetically"? Is there an adverb in French for "energetically"?

4. What other English adverbs can you think of which do not have direct counterparts in French, but must be expressed with **avec** or **sans**?

5. Notice the turn of phrase in paragraph two:"....en quoi les Américains surpassèrent les Européens, ce fut..."
English would omit the equivalent of **ce** (it). Why is this pronoun used in French?

6. What are the forms of **ce + être** in other tenses? (e.g., c'était).

7. What is the literal meaning of **en fait de**, l. 15? What is the past participle of the verb **faire**? How does the word fait relate to the English feat and fact (see an unabridged dictionary, such as the Oxford English Dictionary or Webster's Third International). "

When I first started to use this system of teaching writing,

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I proceeded directly to a third step which consisted of giving out two English paragraphs which were to serve as two separate exercises. I soon discovered that students were not referring enough to the French model text for vocabulary and idioms, preferring the much simpler alternative of referring to their paperback pocket dictionaries. The result was that they were often not doing what they were instructed to do, that is, finding, in the French text, models for expressing certain ideas or constructing idiomatic phrases. The remedy was fairly simple: I thereafter demanded that, before writing a single word of their "composition", the students find in the text the French equivalents of words, infinitives, irregular verbs, reflexive verbs and idiomatic expressions on a list which I gave to them. While this did not in itself guarantee better writing, it had the effect, at least, of drawing their attention to what I wanted them to do. One way of controlling this problem is to deduct points for not using the French text when one of the desired words or expressions was clearly present in that French text.

The following short exercise will give an example of how students may be asked to extract vocabulary and expressions from a French text:

"Find the following expressions in the text, then write the sentence or phrase which follows each of the French expressions.

1. A new club was set up.

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A new school was set up in Rouen.

2. ...right in the middle of Maryland

The museum is right in the middle of Washington.

3. The military instinct was developed.

A new type of airplane was developed about (environ) 1930.

4. Merchants climbed over their counters.

Indiana Jones climbed over a rock and killed a snake.

5. They made themselves into captains.

The grocer made himself into a colonel.

6. In matters of shooting, (they) have nothing more to learn.

The French are very strong in matters of theory.

7. They are pistols compared to American weapons.

Compared to American cars, French cars are tiny.

8. The guns became silent.

The cannon became silent."

It has always seemed to me that there is never enough time in these courses to do everything that could be done with a French text, but if there is time for useful digression, a class could be devoted to English-French word comparisons, to the origins of English words that have been borrowed from French, and for the analysis of idiomatic expressions.

After these preliminaries are out of the way, the students are given two English text which I have written, basing my choice of vocabulary and expression on the original French text. The subject need not be the same, and, ideally, the English texts

should contain variations in subjects, tenses, and the like in order to force the students to think about such matters as agreements, genders, the use of certain tenses (such as the imperfect versus the passé simple), and so on. If a formal grammar is being used, and specific chapters deal with particular grammatical problems, the English text can be made to reflect this.

The writing of these English texts is somewhat time-consuming at first, but with practice, one gets the hang of it and can turn out creditable efforts in an hour or so. Once written, these English texts can be used in future years, and if copying could be a problem in subsequent classes, the English texts can be modified enough so that direct copying can be avoided.

The two English texts which follow are examples of translations based on the French text given above. The length is about right for a one-hour class. Compositions which are too long cannot be easily corrected in one class period. I believe there is more profit in a short translation done well than a long one done sloppily.

Translation 1 ("thème" 1)

"The Americans soon became equal to the Europeans in the "art of war". In the U.S. Civil War, the North won great victories by dint of lavishing dollars and men, but it was especially in the making of cannon that the Americans surpassed the Europeans.

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Their weapons did not reach a high degree of perfection, but they did have unusual range because of their unusual size. European cannons were only toys by comparison.

Translation 2 ("thème" 2)

The arms of war became silent. The guns went back to the arsenals. Little by little, the memory of the war erased itself. Peace was signed by the presidents of the two countries. As a result, the citizens of the two nations forgot, little by little, the horrors of war. It was war which established the armaments makers in both countries. For them, peace would mean (signifier) a loss of many millions of dollars. Therefore, one armaments maker dedicated his factory to a new type of gun with which he hoped to carry off a victory of a different sort. The engineers, by dint of many calculations, achieved a remarkable size for this new gun. They hoped, of course, to send a man to the moon by using a cannon! This was war on another front!"

The extent to which the English text is idiomatic with respect to the French text is a matter of judgment on the part of the instructor. With expressions like "by dint of", I aim to force the students to find French equivalents rather than French words or expressions which will merely translate the English.

The first English text is corrected in class, after asking several students to write parts of the exercise on the board. Professor Donohoe has used an interesting variation involving the use of an overhead television camera and monitors (our language

laboratory has a section for this purpose). He collects a single translation from an individual student, and subjects this paper to the scrutiny of the whole class via the television monitors. He believes that the potential embarrassment caused by writing a paper replete with errors motivates his students to write better.

The second English text can be corrected in class and then collected for grading, or it can be taken for correction and grading without class correction. I have come to prefer asking that the students make two copies--one for immediate collection at the beginning of class, to be read by me later, and one for correction in class, as with the first translation.

The laborious process of correction can be simplified and shortened if the instructor also completes the translation to French and returns an "official" version to the students when their second translation is returned to them. With an "official" version, student errors can usually be underlined and no further writing is needed.

Grading translations is always difficult, and I have resorted to various schemes, both borrowed and invented . One can, of course, simply use an impressionistic system, assigning grades based on the instructor's assessment of overall quality and of the student's adherence to the French text, to his assiduity in looking up genders, agreements, vocabulary and the like. One system which I have heard of is used in English schools, and consists of assigning a certain number of points to

certain kinds of errors. The most points are assigned to the stupidest errors, such as the failure to check genders, or make verbs agree. I have used with some success a system which simply reduces the student's grade by 0.5 for every two errors which I believed the student could reasonably have avoided (genders and agreements, for example, and even the failure to use the French text for expressions, vocabulary and as a syntactic model). A student can go from a 4.0 to a 1.0 very quickly under this system. Students who are used to "anything goes as long as you try" often receive a rude shock when this method of grading is applied, but I have usually found that improvement in their work is rapidly forthcoming.

I have used this method of teaching writing (i.e., translation) in college classes from the fourth year down to the second year, and found that, with appropriate modifications for difficulty, it worked quite well where students were willing to apply themselves and follow instructions. The core of the method is the direction provided both by the analytical questions and by the English texts which are written so as to require the students to refer directly to the French texts for a model. The obvious goal of this kind of analysis and two-way translation is to bring the students to write French that "sounds French" and is not redolent of too many trips to the dictionary. The entire process leads students to a kind of self-monitoring of what they say and write. Those of us who teach languages undoubtedly monitor

ourselves constantly, but students seldom know how to do this. While no method guarantees success with all students, I have found that this one works well with students who are motivated to make the continued effort to improve their French.